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BIBLICAL RESEARCH
PAST AND PRESENT

IRA MAURICE PRICE



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BY

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NOTE



*This Address was delivered at the
National Baptist Anniversaries, Detroit,
Mich., May 26, 1900. As it appears in the
Annual Report of the Publication Society it contains a
few typographical errors which are here corrected.
A partial list of "Literature" on the
general subject has been appended.*

LITERATURE—A SELECTION ONLY

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ON THE MODERN PERIOD :

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THE DRIFT OF BIBLICAL RESEARCH

THE most serviceable friends of the Bible are its interpreters and critics. The most valuable critics of the Bible are found in the ranks of its most ardent students. The most ardent students of the Bible are they who drink deepest at its fountains of truth. The thoroughly Christian critic is the most effective and far-reaching critic of the sacred Scriptures.

If, however, there were no factious criticisms of this book, no coldly scientific analyses of its parts, and no antagonistic blows at its claims and its teachings, we should not be obliged so carefully to examine its foundation and the character of its structure. But, fortunately for the cause of truth, the spirit of this questioning age is storming it at every point, and testing its weakness and its strength, so that its devoted friends are compelled to erect such defenses as will most successfully withstand these assaults.

There has been no period in history when close,

minute, and scientific study of the Bible has played such a *rôle* in literary and religious life as we of to-day see with our own eyes. There has been no age when such beneficent results have been wrought out as these which we count as the most precious product of modern biblical research.

In the limited space at my command I wish to sketch in outline merely (1) the great periods of Bible study and interpretation in the past and some of their gifts to the present; (2) the characteristics of the present period; and (3) some of the probable permanent results of this present critical era.

I. THE GREAT PERIODS OF THE PAST.

The stretch of time from Ezra to the present day is replete with methods of biblical interpretation and criticism. To a lover of the Scriptures these methods have a peculiar fascination. Each successive period reveals a groping after the truth by some new and untried method, which usually owed its origin to the intellectual or spiritual demands of the times. Each successive period carried out its methods with commendable perseverance, and left us a certain small precipitate of value; but the bulk of their findings and their exegeses have been piled away among the for-

gotten and useless tomes of the past. This long expanse of time readily falls into seven commonly recognized periods, characterized rather by their methods than by chronology, and existing, some of them, side by side for long centuries.

1. The first great period of biblical interpretation was the Rabbinic, beginning with Ezra, and reaching well down into the Middle Ages. The method in vogue required that emphasis be placed on the letter of the law,—that the Old Testament, in its very letters, their number and arrangement and numerical values, was of supreme importance. For example, the sum total of the numerical values of the Hebrew words of Gen. 49 : 10, “Shiloh come,” equals the sum total of the letters forming “Messiah,” hence, “Shiloh” is “Messiah.” The day of the atonement was the only day on which Satan could bring an accusation, because the values of the Hebrew word for Satan equal three hundred and sixty-four, and the extra day, or three hundred and sixty-fifth, was the day of atonement. The law had six hundred and thirteen precepts, because the numerical value of the word for incense equals six hundred and thirteen. This system of juggling with numbers soon led to a letter-worship, to an idolatry of the law, to a

formalism from which the spiritual entirely disappeared. The self-confident spirit of rabbinism buried the Scriptures and things spiritual and divine under a mountain of human invention and tradition. Out of these conditions sprang Pharisaism with all its fatal results. They left us a mass of rabbinical literature, which formed the basis of most of the later Jewish philosophy, theology, and ethics. But there are two results, and two only, of much value, remaining from this period for the student and interpreter of the word of God: (1) The Jewish life of more than one thousand years, or from 400 B. C. to A. D. 700, is portrayed in almost infinite detail in these rabbinical writings; and (2) instead of cutting up and disarranging the text of the Old Testament, they so revered it and protected it as to keep it strictly intact for succeeding ages.

2. The second great epoch in Scripture interpretation may be called the Hellenistic. It owed its origin to the contact between Hebrew and Greek thought. The Jews who had migrated to Egypt so absorbed the language and learning of the Greeks that they trampled upon the hedge which, under the influence of rabbinic methods, had grown up around the law. Their headquarters was Alexan-

dria, one of the great cosmopolitan centers, where there was a free interchange of Oriental, Jewish, and Greek culture. Orthodox Jews, who viewed with alarm these minglings of culture, sought for some method of harmonizing Greek philosophy and the Old Testament. Aristobulus (about 180 B. C.) laid the foundation of the allegorical method of interpretation which found its greatest exponent in Philo. This philosopher maintained that the philosophy of Plato and even of Pythagoras had been largely borrowed from the law of the Old Testament. He held that all the tenets of the Greek philosophers, especially of Aristotle, were to be found in Moses and the prophets, if one should conduct his inquiry according to proper methods. The whole system of philosophy wrought out by Philo is either based upon or largely influenced by allegory. The literal sense of Scripture was a kind of concession made to the weak and ignorant. "The green herb of the field," in Genesis, means "that portion of the mind which is perceptible only by the intellect." To interpret literally the words, "God planted a garden in Eden," is impiety. It means that "God implants terrestrial virtue in the human race." "The tree of life" is that most general virtue which some people call "goodness."

This method gave the interpreter a wide range and unlimited liberty. If the literal sense did not contradict the harmonistic ideas of the interpreter, it was allowable, but by no means probable. Though Philo was a man of profound learning and deep piety, his methods of Scripture interpretation were essentially vicious. They drove the Jews into a slavish literalism and paved the way for the rationalism of Alexandrian allegory. The pernicious methods of that age have not entirely disappeared from the exegesis of our day.

3. The third great method of Bible study was the Patristic. It arose at the close of the first century, about the time of Clement of Rome (A. D. 95), and stretched down into the Middle Ages. The church Fathers could not rid themselves of the methods of their days. Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, were largely influenced by the rabbinical and allegorical methods current about them. But one feature of their interpretation was a distinct advance on their predecessors. Origen and his pupils and successors emphasized the importance of studying the very text of Scripture, even if that text were a translation. The school of Antioch took up this one valid principle of Origen, but totally discarded his

allegorical methods. It further maintained that Scripture must be interpreted with due regard to the historical background and to the conditions which gave rise to its utterances. They gave close attention to linguistic details, to the special style of each author, and to the study of each passage or book as a whole. Chrysostom, of this same school, added as his personal contribution a method of finding and applying the spiritual lessons of each passage. But with the close of the fourth century this remarkable Syrian school passed away. The Western branch, with Jerome and Augustine as the most notable representatives of the patristic period, still advanced, discarding some of the principles of Origen, but clinging, in the main, to the necessity of wrestling with the text itself to secure its most hidden meaning.

4. The fourth great epoch in Scripture interpretation may be called the Scholastic, embracing the period from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. From the seventh to the twelfth century we have five hundred years of total barrenness. "During the scholastic epoch," says Farrar, "from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, there are but few of the many who toiled in this field who added a single essential principle, or furnished a single

contribution to the explanation of the word of God. During these nine centuries we find very little except the 'glimmerings and decays' of patristic exposition." The schoolmen held a superstitious and mechanical theory of inspiration. They were, almost to a man, ignorant of the languages of the Bible, neglected history, especially of Bible times, made exegesis but an arbitrary juxtaposition of texts and an abuse of the dialectic method, and presupposed that all Scripture had a multiplex sense. This dangerous hypothesis gave great room for the play of their dialectics. For example, Thomas Aquinas says that, "Let there be light" may mean, historically, an act of creation; allegorically, "Let Christ be love"; anagogically, "May we be led by Christ to glory"; and tropologically, "May we be mentally illumined by Christ." "By some this four-fold sense was compared with the four colors of the veil of the tabernacle, to the four winds, to the four rivers of paradise, to the four legs of the table of the Lord" (Farrar, p. 295). The schoolmen reveled in such methods of exegesis and wove from the church Fathers and the Scriptures the most abstract and speculative results, often mingled with the subtleties of Plato and Aristotle. While

this epoch has yielded us almost no exegetical results, it has left us some characters—such as Bonaventura, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas—who were wholly transformed by the Spirit of God, and who fed daily upon the simple truth of the word, unmixed with the paralyzing dialectic of the times.

5. The fifth epoch, the Reformation, was a day-star in the history of Scripture interpretation. The intense enthusiasm, learning, power, and great good sense of Lorenzo Valla (died 1465) in methods of Scripture study, of John Reuchlin (died 1522), the great Hebrew scholar, and of Erasmus (died 1536), the New Testament Greek scholar, prepared the way in part for the appearance and the great forward strides of Luther, and for those stalwart champions, Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin. The fact that the renaissance of learning had turned men's minds to the study of literature was an aid in stirring up an interest in the investigation of the Bible itself. To do this, however, required a knowledge of the languages in which its books were written. The facilities for doing just this thing were already becoming available, and independent Christian scholars bent their energies in the direction of Scripture interpretation.

Without discussing any specified advances, I will indicate some of the principles of interpretation laid down in that epoch which have permanent value: (1) The necessity of philological and grammatical knowledge; (2) the importance of considering times, circumstances, and conditions in which any particular passage or book was produced; (3) a careful observance of the context before attempting to interpret any given passage; (4) the need of faith and spiritual illumination in addition to all the foregoing qualifications and conditions. Luther and his coadjutors insisted too, (1) on the supreme and final authority of Scripture; (2) on the sufficiency of Scripture; (3) on the right of private judgment.

6. The sixth period may be termed the Dogmatic, extending from the Reformation to the middle of the eighteenth century. The boasted freedom of the Reformation was soon dethroned by the bitterness of controversies and the bondage of dogmatism. The Reformation freedom of Scripture interpretation was soon fettered by a tyrannous confessionalism, by elaborate systems of doctrine, and by scores of creeds. Almost every city and every system of belief had its creed. In 1529 we have the Articles of Marburg;

1530, the Confession of Augsburg; 1536, the Wittenberg Concord; 1537, Articles of Schmal-kalden; 1562, the thirty-nine Articles; 1566, the *Confessio Helvetica Posterior*; 1580, the *Formula Concordiæ* of Lutheranism; and 1643, the Westminster Confession. The formulation of these creeds and the decrees of synods and councils fastened upon Christendom certain versions of Scriptures and specific, circumscribed limits within which an exegete could exercise his gifts. Aristotelian dialectics and dogmatics controlled the thought of the day. Scripture was used only as embodied in great tomes of ecclesiastical polemics and was not supposed to yield any further light to investigators.

While this age of controversies, creeds, dogmatism, and heresy-hunting was paralyzing the spiritual life of the church, a few choice spirits arose who turned the scale at the end of this period and inaugurated the rise of a new epoch. Koch (died 1669), of Leyden, for a true exegesis, and Cappellus (died 1658) for criticism, on the side of Scripture interpretation, among others, burst the bonds of that era and prepared the way for the modern period.

Nearly two thousand years of Scripture interpre-

tation did not produce for the church a set of well-established and sound principles of Scripture interpretation. The Rabbinic, the Hellenistic, the Patristic, the Scholastic, the Reformation, and the Dogmatic eras produced marvelous harmonizations, endless controversies, irreconcilable bitterness, great schools of dogmaticians, the *finesse* of dialectics, and unnumbered tomes of so-called literature. But where are their ponderous works, full of vast erudition, their settlement of the intricate questions in biblical interpretation, and its application to Christian life? The vast proportion is known by titles only, and oblivion has rightly laid claim to most of their dogmatic utterances. Only here and there throughout this vast stretch of time do we find the enunciation of principles which will have perpetual value for the interpretation of the Scriptures.

II. THE MODERN PERIOD.

The middle of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of a new era in biblical research. It opened the door to the modern period, which stands quite alone in its methods of biblical criticism and interpretation. It has gathered up and appropriated the sound principles enunciated in every

preceding period, and has laid down some rules of its own, whose validity and universality are now being put to the test. The underlying purpose of the Bible students and critics of this epoch, viz, to ascertain the meaning of Scripture, is not essentially different from that of every preceding age. But the difference in the conditions and thought of these times may justify a brief survey of the characteristics of the era in which we live.

1. One of the first and chief facts characteristic of this age is the importance attached to the study of the sources. There is no department of science, philosophy, or theology, which does not demand of the scholar a careful, minute, and painstaking investigation of the sources of his knowledge. In Scripture study this principle has already been given its fixed place. Semler, Herder, and Lessing, even in the last century, insisted that the Bible itself should be thoroughly studied if men were to comprehend its import. This principle has driven biblical scholars and critics of every progressive school to a severely minute examination of all the available sources of its text. In a word, the text of the book itself, and not creeds, decrees, Articles, or Confessions, is the true source used by the true

biblical critics and interpreters of this era. *This is textual, or lower criticism.*

2. The same spirit that has driven men to study the sources has carried along with it certain scientific principles to be used in their interpretation. The fact that these sources are literature of various kinds, subjects them to the principles by which every literature must be studied and criticized. The books of the Bible present certain individual traits, such as form, style, and vocabulary, that must be taken into account. There are marks too, in some books, of compilation, of editorial revision, and of the quotation and the use of earlier writers. There are also statements, scientific, historical, and archæological, which must be tested by the generally recognized principles of criticism. All this is demanded by every modern school of biblical interpretation. *This is literary, historical, or higher criticism.*

3. It was recognized by the Syrian school of interpreters in the fourth and not again until the sixteenth century, that the Bible was the product of certain times; that it grew out of the soil of ancient days, and carries in itself the marks of those days; that its truest interpretation followed a study of those times. Though the background

of the New Testament was comparatively well known a half-century ago, the Old Testament has become a new book historically within the last forty years. The entire period of the Old Testament, from Abraham to Nehemiah, now lies on a new background. Israel's rise, progress, decline, and fall, before the mighty empires of the East, can now be followed in their awful reality by the clear light of the records of their powerful contemporaries. The prophet's arraignment of Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria, and his condemnation of the gods of the nations, are forceful and fearful in the light of the character of these deities in the East and the West as revealed on the monuments of those old peoples.

Though some early critics paid slight regard to these revelations, the brilliancy of this new light now compels recognition. Sound principles of literary and historical criticism require a study of the times out of which a given product sprang, and are forcing all scholars, all Bible interpreters, to pay due regard to this new and ever-growing important element.

4. Every early method of Scripture interpretation, as we saw, was strongly influenced by the intellectual peculiarities of the times. This is in-

evitable if the Bible is to occupy its proper place in the lives of the thinkers of any age. Fortunately, this era of Bible study has laid broad foundations in textual work for grappling with the problems of the day. As in every era of the past, men have striven to find some principle or principles of harmonization between science, in its broad sense, and revelation, or between the dominant thought of the day and the Bible.

Two prominent phases of current thought are now swaying a mighty influence on some phases of biblical scholarship. The first of these is the naturalistic theory of evolution. It is conceded that there is a large element of truth in this theory as applied to nature and to the mind, but its universal validity is by no means established. There are some departments of investigation where evolution is not found. As an example, a leading professor of chemistry lately said, "There is no evolution in my science."

Now there is a class of biblical critics and interpreters whose methods and processes are almost entirely dominated by this phase of modern thought. By its principles they are compelled, especially in the Old Testament, to rearrange its literature, its history, its laws, and its doctrines.

They reconstruct the entire Old Testament, not by the principles of higher criticism alone, which is in and of itself a perfectly legitimate and safe method of procedure, but by a distorted higher criticism, or a higher criticism inoculated with the naturalistic theory of evolution. This fact has made "higher criticism" a synonym of all that is vicious in Bible study, whereas the odium should be heaped on the shoulders of the naturalistic evolutionary critics. Now, I am free to recognize the principle of accommodation, of progression in Jehovah's dealings with his growing people, of the natural developments of language, law, and doctrine; but to require at the outset that the whole scheme of revelation and redemption should be subservient to the laws of a naturalistic evolution is equivalent to the obliteration of predictive prophecy, miracles, and every mark which distinguishes the Bible from other literature. To line up the literature, history, and prophecy of the Bible and compel it to yield to the extreme demands of a naturalistic evolution, we must treat it and its statements as no other literature and history in all the past or present is treated.

The second phase of modern thought that is beginning seriously to affect biblical criticism and inter-

pretation is that subjective theory of the Christian life or that scheme of theology now termed Ritschlianism. This composite of the ideas of Kant, Schleiermacher, Lotze, and Ritschl, as well as of the disciples of the last named, has won for itself a large place in the theological world. "We know things not as they are in themselves, but as they are for us." In other words, the subjective element is the ultimate standard in religion. While Ritschl has made valuable contributions to the thought of this day, his system, even in its modified forms is, in a large sense, self-centered, subjective, and without any authority beyond or outside of self. The endeavor to harmonize the doctrines of the Bible, especially of the New Testament, with this in many ways attractive hypothesis, has already begun to show its results. Its action is exceedingly insidious, but none the less certain. It has already begun its work in the disintegration of some of the essential doctrines of the Bible.

The attempts already made by the harmonizers of the Bible with these two phases of modern thought have been only partially successful. Some of the results which may be regarded as alarming are: (1) The expunging from Scripture of predictive prophecy; (2) the rejection of the miraculous;

(3) the rejection of the doctrine of the pre-existence, miraculous birth, and resurrection of Christ; (4) the non-acceptance of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and along with it, the doctrine of regeneration; and (5) the denial of the proper deity of Jesus Christ. These positions are already being wrought out in certain schools and lines of biblical criticism and interpretation, and are phases of modern theological thought that demand the most earnest attention on the part of the Christian scholarship of our day.

5. While not unique in this epoch, there is another phase of biblical scholarship which cannot be passed by. There are others engaged in this work who are characterized by a broad scholarship, by a sympathetic, glowing Christian life, by sound critical and exegetical principles, by a commanding intellectual fairness, and by the absence of that dogmatism so prevalent in the post-Reformation period, and not entirely lacking among modern writers on biblical themes. These men are by no means blind to progress, nor are they easily captivated by startling and fair-faced theories. They grant full recognition to facts, and proceed as fast and as far as these facts carry them. They are ready to take theories for theories, and as soon as

they can be found to explain the facts, to accept them as true.

This class of scholars is not popular among the radical harmonizers, nor will their influence count for its full worth while the present campaign is before the public. Every age in the past has had its coterie of these men, and as we look back upon them, they are the only men whose lives and works have left a permanent precipitate of value to later generations of Scripture interpreters.

III. SOME PERMANENT RESULTS OF MODERN METHODS.

The characteristics of this modern period of biblical criticism and interpretation will leave some results of permanent value. Without attempting in any way to act the part of a seer, I think I can discern, from the history of Scripture interpretation and from the present status of this science, some increments of value which will remain as the permanent possessions of Bible students. I shall not attempt to name more than a few of these results.

1. The Bible, which in former ages has been regarded in some circles as a kind of talisman, is now, and always will continue to be, accorded a place in the permanent literature of the world.

Its full recognition by literary men of the present centuries has assigned it a definite and undisputed value as literature. This fact alone has won for it a favor hitherto unknown among persons whose training and trend have been and are far from Christian. It has thus become the object of study of those whose motive has been wholly literary and artistic. Its history and thought have become so woven into public utterances that some of the most striking figures in editorials of many of our daily papers are taken from biblical characters and events. Even fiction has effectively and successfully used some of the most romantic events of Scripture. Yes, the Bible has taken an important place among the literatures of the world, and is demonstrating this importance by the public recognition that is accorded its history, its poetry, and its laws.

2. Every former epoch in the study of the Bible, looked upon the Israelites of the Old Testament in a false light. They were practically the only nation of ancient times, and were too, a kind of unreality. Their place among the nations of their day was ill-proportioned and misjudged. Their defections from Jehovah were misinterpreted, and their religious conceptions fore-shortened by inter-

preters, because of their practical isolation in the ancient world.

But now we have a different picture. Israel was but one of the small peoples of antiquity. They occupied a minor place in the world's commerce and politics. They were contemporaneous with the most powerful nations of antiquity for a period of about one thousand years. These great peoples, the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Phœnicians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and Persians, all touched and influenced the political, commercial, social, and religious life of Israel. Their presence and power bore its fruits in Israel's religious decline and fall. In a word, one of the permanent results of present biblical research will be the proper recognition of Israel's place among the nations of ancient times, and thus the proper interpretation of so much of the Old Testament as is dependent on the new historical background furnished by the inscriptions.

3. Another result which we may look for as a fruit of biblical criticism is the establishment of the true place of monotheism in the religion of Israel and among the religions of the world. The attempt to evolve monotheism out of a primitive polytheism, as made in Robertson Smith's "Re-

ligion of the Semites," and a number of more recent writers, is weighed down with untenable hypotheses. This theory is one with the naturalistic evolution of the Old Testament, and attempts in a scientific manner, and in a manner accordant with some of the dominant thought of our times, to account for the multifarious divinities found among ancient peoples. It is now quite as generally accepted that evolution descends as well as ascends in the scale of being. This being true, and the fact that the farther we go back among the great nations of antiquity the fewer in number the deities become, points to a time when there was possibly in the dawn of antiquity one God. In a word, we may expect that one of the permanent results of this age of biblical research will be a determination of the true place of monotheism in the history of Israel's religion and in the religions of the races of the earth.

4. The full and cordial recognition of the Bible as literature, and its writers as men with individual characteristics, the assignment of Israel to its true place among the ancient nations of the East, and the determination of the true place of monotheism in the development of the religion of the Old Testament, demands and will be speedily followed by a

reconstruction of the doctrine of inspiration. This reconstructed doctrine must and will include in its *formulæ* not simply the recognition of the Bible's testimony to itself, but must take account of the humanity of men as its recipients, must define more exactly the specific part taken by the Holy Spirit in its production, must take account of the assured results of the severest genuine textual and historical criticism, and must formulate the external reasons for the superiority of Scripture to the sacred books of all nations. Neither the verbal, the variously defined plenary, the dynamic, nor any other mechanical or semi-mechanical theory of inspiration, as hitherto formulated, will hold a place among the final results of modern biblical investigation. None of these adequately takes into account the great variety of elements which enter into the origin, growth, unequal character, and power of Scripture. This reconstruction must be a doctrine that will explain all the facts satisfactorily to the ardent student of God's word, the thoroughly sympathetic and evangelical investigator, and the devout Christian scientist and thinker.

5. But the choicest result of the biblical research of our day will be the enthroning of the Bible in the Christian life. Neither creeds, symbols, nor

tomes of philosophico-theological dogma will satisfy the cravings of the human soul. The tyrannous decrees of the post-Reformation period will never again chain down and lock the lids of the Bible in the face of the investigation and the intelligent conclusions of this age. But before this result is reached there is a danger, and a serious one, to which the men of our day are exposed. They are called upon to decide between works which are devoutly evangelical and scholarly and works which are critically scholarly, but permeated with methods of harmonization that tone down some of the severest Bible doctrines and devitalize some of its essential truths. The danger-line, the demarcation between the essentials of the Christian life and the life of the world, are in many persons and some churches fast fading away. This free and easy method of belief will have its day, and ere long the genuine evangelical church and genuine evangelical Christians will be easily distinguished and the Bible will be again enthroned with all its primitive and divine power. The ephemeral and evanescent literature of criticism, permeated by unproved and untenable theories, will be piled away in the antiquarian alcoves of public libraries as relics of one of the past phases of biblical research. But the

Bible itself, recognized as religious literature, as the one great source and the basis of evangelical truth, rightly characterized by a reconstructed doctrine of inspiration, will be supreme in the Christian life of the future.



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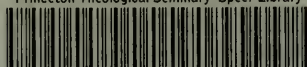
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